

Cooks winning hearts, minds...and stomachs

By Capt. Ryan Bardo

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They say the fastest way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Members of the 16th Signal Battalion may have proven that to be true.

Recently, Sgt. Jose Lozano and Spc. Alex Hull, food service specialists from Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 16th Sig. Bn., conducted two weeks of training with their food service counterparts from the 3rd Iraqi Army Division at Forward Operating Base Sykes in northern Iraq.

While the Iraqi army division has its own cooks who prepare food for their division each day, none were trained in field food service operations. Fourteen of their cooks were hand-selected by their command sergeant major to learn how to prepare meals in a field environment with their newly acquired, Russian-made MKTs, or mobile kitchen trailers. Lozano and Hull teamed with two other cooks from the 94th Engineer Battalion to provide the training.

"We arrived at FOB Sykes a few days before the Iraqi cooks, so we had a chance to figure out the Russian MKTs before they got there," said Lozano, who noted the MKTs were being used as sleeping quarters or to hold prisoners. "They were about 30 years old and were in pretty bad shape, but we did our best to fix them up and scrounged up equipment and supplies from our friends at KBR (contractors who run the U.S. dining facility on FOB Sykes)," he said.

The American cooks developed a training plan that focused on sanitation, safety, and proper food preparation methods. The Iraqi cooks hailed from all across northern Iraq including the towns of Kirkuk, Tikrit, Mosul, Irbil, Rabbah, Al Kindi and Baghdad. At first they seemed timid about working with the American soldiers and even a bit skeptical of the training. But two events quickly changed

that.

"The Russian MKTs use kerosene fuel which is not as safe as the fuel we use," said Lozano, "On the third day, one of the MKTs caught fire when the feed hose came unconnected from the grill. We used up all of our fire extinguishers and then threw sand on the fire to put it out. After that, the Iraqi's trusted us a lot more and became more involved in the training.

"Around that same time, some of the Iraqi soldiers got sick from the food at the Iraqi dining facility," Lozano continued. "When nobody got sick at our MKT, they started paying more attention to the food sanitation standards we had been teaching them."

The American Soldiers quickly adapted to some of the cultural differences they noticed which greatly improved

the training; as well. Most notable was the Iraqis' preference for hands-on training, so Lozano dropped the classroom training to spend more time on the MKT. Through their translator, Sam, they trained the cooks to prepare food for 20 Soldiers, then 50, then 100.

"After a few days, Sam became so familiar with the training that he could answer a lot of their questions and do the training without our help," Hull noted.

The Iraqi diet consists mostly of rice and flatbread with chicken or beef, which Lozano and Hull enjoyed eating with their students each day. They also came to enjoy the Iraqi tradition of "chai time," or afternoon tea. Every day around 2 o'clock they would take a break from training to enjoy a cup of chai tea. Then they would begin preparing dinner.

Lozano and Hull enjoyed their time training with the Iraqi Army, an opportunity they hope to have again in the future.

"The Iraqis are very friendly and open and they have excellent discipline," said Hull. "I would definitely do it again."



Courtesy photo

Sgt. Jose Lozano and Spc. Alex Hull, food service specialists from HHC, 16th Sig. Bn., provided field food service training to Iraqi counterparts